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## THE STRUCTURE OF THE FIRST EPISTLE OF SAINT JOHN.

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*Apparent lack of orderly arrangement.—Difficulties arising from the style of the writer.—(1) Monotony caused by repetition.—(2) Fewness of connecting particles.—(3) Unnoticed synonyms.—(4) Omission of connecting links in the chain of thought.—Analysis of the epistle.—Its general arrangement and distinct purpose.*

IN most of the New Testament epistles the general structure and main line of thought are clearly evident. But the first epistle of St. John seems like a disjointed series of meditations rather than like a letter with a definite purpose and plan. And yet the writer tells us that he had a clear purpose in view; and that not merely a general one, the increase of mutual joy (1:4), but a specific one, to furnish a test whereby the presence of the divine life in the soul might be recognized (5:13). The gospel is written, he says to his readers, "that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may *have life*;" the epistle "unto you that [already] believe" for a further purpose, viz., "that ye may *know that ye have eternal life*." And we ought to hope that in spite of apparent difficulties we may find that a pastoral letter so composed has a distinct beginning, middle, and end, all bearing upon that purpose.

But if there be a plan, and a distinct course of thought, it is certainly obscured by some peculiarities of the writer's style which constitute very real difficulties. A discussion of these may well precede an attempt to set out in brief the argument of the epistle.

1. The first of these difficulties comes from the mental attitude caused by the *apparent repetition in one sentence of what has just been said* in the sentence preceding. An impression of monotony

is produced upon the mind; our intellectual faculties are lulled to sleep; the attention is diverted from the slight differences of expression to which we must look for the development of the thought, and is almost forced to dwell upon the repeated words and the similarities of expression. The parallelism of Hebrew poetry appears again and again; the second member of the couplet, however, is not a mere repetition of the first. We think that the writer has made a complete circle and come around to his starting point; we look again and see that the ends of the line do not meet, that a *loop* has been made, that the thought, instead of returning upon itself, has advanced a step. The movement of the thought is like a series of loops, or a spiral spring, rather than a straight line; where St. Paul is like the mountain torrent rushing with leaps and bounds directly to its goal, St. John is like the stream meandering in tranquil links through the quiet meadows.

Examples are countless; one of the best is to be found in the very first verses. The repetitions and the advance in thought may be thus represented:

1. (a) *That which was from the beginning,*  
 (b) *that which we have heard . . . seen . . . handled*  
 (c) *concerning the word of life,*  
 2.                   (c) *and the                      life*  
 (b) *was manifested and we have seen*  
 (d) *and bear witness and declare unto you*  
 (c) *the life,*  
 (a) *the eternal, which was with the Father*  
 (b) *and was manifested unto us;*  
 3.                   (b) *that which we have seen and heard*  
 (d) *declare we unto you also,*  
 (e) *that ye also may have fellowship with us;*
- yea, and our fellowship is with the Father (a), and with his Son Jesus Christ (b).

Verse 1, it will be seen, brings out the character of the revelation in Christ; verse 2 recapitulates and adds the thought of apostolic testimony; verse 3 recapitulates again and adds the purpose of the testimony.

2. A second difficulty arises from another characteristic of Hebrew thought. The Hebrew language is as poor in connecting particles as the Greek is rich, and the Hebrew poverty appears to the full in this epistle. Where another writer would say "for," "because," "hence," "but," "yet," St. John often says simply "and," or even omits the conjunction entirely. *He puts his thoughts side by side, and leaves it to us to determine their relation.* This, indeed, adds to the suggestiveness of the epistle; for there may be more than one link of connection between two ideas, and the emphasizing of one by a definite particle might obscure another: at the same time this characteristic, taken in connection with the one previously mentioned, renders it necessary for the mind to keep upon the alert, and to make an active effort, if we would not have an effect produced like that of Psalm 119 or the Book of Proverbs. Take, for example, 3:2-6. The insertion of the needed words would have the effect of discords in the midst of a beautiful phrase of music; it would be at the expense of both fulness and beauty that we should gain clearness; and yet we might make insertions somewhat as follows: "It is not yet made manifest what we shall be; we know, *however*, that . . . . we shall be like him. . . . . So then everyone that hath this hope . . . . purifieth himself. . . . . For ye know that . . . . in him is no sin; . . . . consequently, whosoever abideth in him sinneth not, *and, on the other hand*, whosoever sinneth hath not seen him . . . ."

We may say, then, that the very simplicity of the style, showing itself thus in repetition and in asyndeton, constitutes the epistle difficult and obscure. Yet a truth found as the result of attention and thought is not less valuable, and when thus found it is more surely impressed upon the mind. And if, owing to the apparent lack of connection, the course of thought appears different to different minds, as the history of the interpretation of this epistle proves, who shall say that the whole truth is found in any one exposition, or that the church is not the richer for the variety of things, new and old, which instructed scribes have brought forth from this treasure of divine teaching?

Two other difficulties remain to be mentioned and illustrated.

3. Contrasted with the apparent repetitions and the meagerness of vocabulary is a less obvious characteristic: *the expression of the same or similar and related ideas in different words*, without anything to indicate a change of expression or the reason for it. The most striking instance begins with the disappearance after 1:7 of the word "fellowship," which at its introduction in 1:3 gives the keynote of the epistle. The purpose of the preaching of the word is to bring about "fellowship," communion, with God (1:3), and if we walk in the light we have this "fellowship" (1:7). When the idea recurs, however, an expression which is even stronger is used: to *be* or to *abide in* God. The connection of 2:5, 6 with chap. 1 is missed unless this is noted. But both these expressions of "fellowship" and "abiding" are synonymous with the idea which runs through the whole epistle, that of "life," life which is eternal. The ideas are brought together in 2:24, 25: "Ye shall *abide in* the Son and in the Father; and this [abiding] is the promise which he promised us, even the *life eternal*." But we have not reached the end of this group of synonyms. "Fellowship" or "communion" with God is sharing the "life" of God; but to share the Father's life is to be his "children" (3:1, 2, 10; 5:2); and in relation to one another "brothers;" and to receive this new life is to be "begotten" or "born" of God, a phrase not introduced until the end of the second chapter (2:29), but recurring 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 18. The recognition of the fact that "brother," "begotten of God," "child of God" mean precisely the same thing helps us to understand the close connection of the passage 4:20—5:2. We need only add the fact that the "life" of God which his "children" thus share is the essence of God, which is "love" (4:8).

4. The fourth characteristic which throws light upon the sequence of ideas is akin to the third. We have seen how the third demands that we recognize synonyms as such, without explanation; this assumes that the mind will recognize the connection of *isolated links in a chain of ideas nowhere fully drawn out*, but everywhere implied. For example, 1:3 assumes a connection which is not at once obvious between the apostolic

"witness" and a resulting "fellowship." The whole group of ideas to which I allude occurs together, though somewhat unsystematically, in 4:7—5:3. I have ventured to draw it out in more systematic form. It describes the progress of love towards perfection, and may be entitled

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF GOD'S LIFE IN THE CHURCH.

- (1) LOVE (4:8)=the (eternal) LIFE (1:2) of God=LIGHT (1:5; 2:10)
- (2) was manifested in Christ by the INCARNATION (4:9) and ATONEMENT (4:10).
- (3) This was seen by the apostles, who bear WITNESS thereof (1:2; 4:14),
- (4) to which we respond by FAITH in Christ as Son of God (4:15, 16a),
- (5) and God's love to us (4:16; 3:16) becomes the source of our LOVE TO HIM (4:19).
- (6) We have thus RECEIVED as a gift (3:1) the LOVE (=life, 3:14) of God (=are BEGOTTEN of him (4:7; 5:1, 19), =are CHILDREN OF GOD);
- (7) we share his (eternal) life (2:24b, 25; 5:12) = ABIDE in him (4:15, 16) (=have FELLOWSHIP with the Father and the Son, 1:3).
- (8) We LOVE AS BROTHERS (4:20) all the other children of God (5:1b) (for they share this fellowship, 1:3);
- (9) such love is shown in WORKS (3:17)=WALKING (2:6) in LIGHT (1:7) (=keeping commandments, 3:24a; 5:2, 3);
- (10) and herein is GOD'S LOVE PERFECTED IN US (2:5; 4:12, 17).

(This proves that God's Spirit dwells in us (3:24b; 4:13), and thereby further quickens our faith (5:7).)

It may be seen then, recurring to 1:3, "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you also, that ye also may have fellowship with us," that the links which are there omitted are the fourth, fifth, and sixth above; that the witness of the apostles results in fellowship because they witness to God's love, to

which we respond by faith, whereby our own love is quickened, making us children sharing his likeness, and so in fellowship with all our brothers who share this same eternal life of God.

We see again why, throughout his epistles, St. John lays such stress upon a right faith in Christ as the Son of God. It is because that spirit of self-sacrificing love which is essential to a right life comes in its fulness from and depends for its growth upon our faith in the love of God as manifested in the incarnation and death of his Son.

With the preceding considerations in mind the following attempt to express briefly the line of thought of the epistle has been prepared. The endeavor has been made in each section to select from the midst of some repetitions of preceding ideas the thought which seems both to be the new one, and at the same time to stand in closest relation to the ideas of the sections preceding and following. The connection between the different sections has been shown, where possible, by combining the ideas of several sections in a single sentence. A brief summary of the whole is prefixed.

SUBJECT.—LOVE; THE COMMUNION OF GOD'S CHILDREN IN THE FATHER'S LIFE.

- I. *its necessity*, for God is unmixed light;
- II. *its nature*, righteousness like Christ's;
- III. *its source and result*, faith in the incarnation.

I:1-4 INTRODUCTION.—Faith in the apostolic witness leads to joyous communion with God.

I. LOVE IS A NECESSITY FOR THOSE IN COMMUNION WITH GOD; WORLDLINESS AND DENIAL OF THE INCARNATION ARE EXCLUDED.

- 1 : 5-10 We cannot have communion with God, and live in sin; yet we are sinners,
- 2 : 1-6 but we are forgiven through Christ, if we abide in him and live as he lived,

- 7-11 namely, a life of love, with no trace of its opposite.  
12-17 Now that you are forgiven and know the Father, you must avoid all worldliness;  
18-23 and, recognizing that those who deny the incarnation of the Son lose their hold on the Father,  
24-29 maintain the faith through the Holy Spirit, and so retain the divine life, in union with the Son and the Father.

**II. LOVE INVOLVES ACTIVE RIGHTEOUSNESS, WHICH ASSURES US OF THE INDWELLING OF THE SPIRIT, WHO TESTIFIES TO THE INCARNATION.**

- 3 : 1-6 Those who by infused love are made God's children grow to maturity through constant self-purifying;  
7-12 such show love in righteous acts, while the unrighteous and unloving are of Satan.  
13-18 Love is life; it shows itself in acts of self-sacrifice after Christ's pattern,  
19-24 and these give confidence towards God because they prove the indwelling of his Spirit;  
4 : 1-6 while false spirits are known by their denying the incarnation, and being listened to by the world.

**III. LOVE SPRINGS FROM FAITH IN THE INCARNATION, AND ITS PRESENCE CONFIRMS THAT FAITH.**

- 4 : 7-13 God is love, revealed in Christ, abiding by his Spirit in those who love;  
14-21 this abiding depends on faith in the incarnation; it involves likeness to Christ and love for all who share this life.  
5 : 1-5 Such love is known to be from God by our keeping his commands, which are made easy by the victory of our faith.  
6-12 The existence of this divine life in the soul of believers is God's testimony to them and to others of the truth of the incarnation.

EPILOGUE.—THIS LIFE FLOWS FROM GOD, SHOWS ITSELF IN  
RIGHTEOUSNESS, LEADS TO INTERCESSION.

5:13-17 The possession of this life leads to confident intercession for the erring;

18-21 it is proved by an unworldly life of righteousness; and comes from the recognition of God in Christ, who *is* himself this life.

Looked at in this way, the arrangement of the epistle resembles that of a carefully planned sermon. The first division emphasizes the importance of the subject; the second develops the main practical thought; the third supplies encouragement to action, showing whence we gain the needed strength, and the happy result which follows,—by faith we increase love, by love we strengthen faith. And with this agree the opening words of each great division: 1:5, “This is the message: God is light and no darkness at all,”—you must be *wholly* on his side; 3:1, “See of what sort this love is which the Father has [not showed but] given to us;” 4:7, “Ye loved ones, let us love one another.”

We see, lastly, how the purpose has been fulfilled which the writer states in the first words of his epilogue, 5:13, “These things have I written that ye may know that ye have life.” The divine and eternal life in the soul is the gift of God, the gift of his own nature, even love; the means whereby it enters the soul is faith,—faith in the eternal love manifested in Christ; *the test and proof of the existence of this life is active righteousness*, self-sacrificing love for our brothers: “If we love one another God abideth in us, and his love is perfected in us; and hereby we know that we abide in him and he in us.”